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U.S.: Photos show Nicaragua buildup

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration declassified a set of aircraft reconnaissance photographs yesterday in an effort to document its contention that Nicaragua is involved in a massive military buildup supported by Cuba.

The photographs, taken from manned aircraft, showed barracks, airfields and training facilities that the administration said were of Cuban and Soviet design.

Included were pictures of Soviet-built tanks in training areas, construction on airport runways apparently being extended to handle sophisticated Soviet MiG jet fighters and elaborate training grounds.

An intelligence analyst, John Hughes, described by officials as the "premier photo interpreter in the U.S. intelligence community," said the photographs had been taken in the last two years, since the Marxist-oriented Sandinista government took power.

Adm. Bobby Inman, deputy director of the CIA, said the photographs were being made public in response to denials by a high-level Nicaraguan official that his country was engaged in a military buildup. U.S. officials repeatedly have made that assertion.

Inman declined to answer questions about how the photographs were taken or how often Nicaraguan airspace has been violated by U.S. reconnaissance planes.

He said he was "angry" because the Nicaraguan official, Jaime Wheelock, minister of agriculture and a member of Nicaragua's ruling directorate, had gone unchallenged after asserting over the weekend in New York that U.S. accusations about the Nicaraguan buildup were "completely false."

Said Inman: "He lied directly."

Wheelock, sent by his government to the United States to tell Nicaragua's story, said Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. had been telling "scandalous lies" about Nicaraguan military capabilities in order to create U.S. public support for military intervention in Central America.

The case that officials were trying to make yesterday was a repetition, with photographic support, of the one originally made by Haig in November.

Hughes said Nicaragua was becoming the strongest military power in Central America and was creating "capabilities far in excess of anything required for defensive purposes."

Until the Sandinistas took power, he said, Nicaraguan military forces numbered no more than 10,000, but now — counting both national police and regular military forces — the number may run "up to 70,000 men." About 25,000 to 30,000 of those, he said, would be regular military personnel.

Wheelock had disputed such figures, saying over the weekend that the Nicaraguan army was about 14,000, "not larger" than the force inherited from the previous regime of President Anastasio Somoza.

Hughes said 6,050 Cubans were in Nicaragua helping the government, but a chart listing them by function indicated that more than half were teachers or medical personnel. He also said that at least 50 to 70 Soviet advisers are in Nicaragua.

Inman said that Nicaragua has become a threat to neighboring Central American countries and will become even more of a threat soon if it obtains Soviet-built MiG fighters.

He repeated a Haig assertion that 50 Nicaraguans were being trained in Bulgaria to fly MiGs; and he said all indications were that at least four airfields in Nicaragua were being prepared to handle such aircraft.

"When those MiGs arrive," he said, "the Sandinistas will have the biggest Air Force in Central America."

Inman said that the briefing would be the "first in a series," indicating an administration campaign to increase public support for its hard-line posture in Central America.

The administration apparently plans, in the next few days, to provide evidence of Nicaraguan support of guerrillas in El Salvador.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.